

Your FAMILY Revealed

**A Guide to Decoding
the Patterns, Stories, and Belief Systems
in Your Family**

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Introduction

Our families can be a source of our greatest joys and our deepest struggles. This book is intended to help you decode your family so that you can understand your family dynamics by better understanding how family systems operate, which will allow you to more fully know yourself and anyone with whom you have relationships.

Family constellations have changed significantly in the twenty-first century. Our society began to accept and acknowledge multiracial and multicultural families, as well as single-parent families, blended families, and families with same-sex partners more fully. In addition, in past generations families tended to live in proximity, whereas in our current society, family members often live great distances from one another. This certainly alters the time spent together physically, which may have tremendous impact on individual members as well as the relationship among the members. The distance may also change the psychological impact that family relations have on the family members. But despite how families have changed, they still have enormous influence on our lives and on all of our relationships.

This book explains some of the fundamental concepts found in Family Systems Theory. My intention is to encourage readers to use the concepts presented here to more fully understand how their original families' functioning, patterns, and processing have impacted them in the past, and continue to impact them in the here and now. Also, to recognize how their current relationships impact their extended family system.

This book is a user-friendly guide that explains how a family profoundly impacts its members in a myriad of ways, including:

- Influencing an individual's values and beliefs
- Influencing an individual's sense of self and identity in the world
- Teaching relational skills and emotional/rational responses

The more understanding and awareness you have of these influences, the more power you have to choose who and how you want to be, as well as how you want to relate to others.

As I was completing my graduate studies in counseling psychology in 1973, I was introduced to a *new* way of thinking. Up until the 1950s, most psychology was focused on the individual. By the time I was in graduate school, a new therapy was bursting onto the mental health scene: Family Therapy (Relationship Therapy), which was born out of Family Systems Theory. I became enthralled with this new paradigm, and have remained so throughout the years.

I was fortunate to be one of the early practitioners in this new field of marriage and family therapy, or *relationship* therapy. Now, many years later, having seen hundreds of individuals, couples and families, and teaching graduate courses in Marriage and Family Therapy, I am still fascinated with the study of family systems theory and relationship therapy.

This Labyrinth Called Life

As individuals, we travel this *Labyrinth Called Life*. As I imagine it, each person begins in the center of the labyrinth with one's birth mother and then one's family. We thus embark on our life's journey, traveling out from our families into the world.

Those of us who practice walking the Labyrinth of Life intentionally discover that in order to truly understand and know

ourselves, it is important that we occasionally spiral back to our origins. This journey through the labyrinth is primarily a psychological journey. As we return to examine the beginning of our experiences with our families, our perspectives and understandings alter and deepen at different ages and stages of our lives. How a twenty-year-old understands her experience in her family is deeper and broader than when she was ten. And when this twenty-year-old is forty, her understanding of her family can be even greater, particularly if she chooses to traverse the labyrinth—circling in, circling out.

Those who never truly move outward do not have the perspective to understand their family's dynamics. Those who spiral outward but are unwilling to circle back periodically to experience, contemplate, and deepen their understanding often find themselves feeling disconnected. This person might experience not only being disconnected from family but also not being connected to self. Traversing the labyrinth of the family—moving inward, moving outward, returning, and leaving over the course of our lives—is essential for a true understanding of who we are.

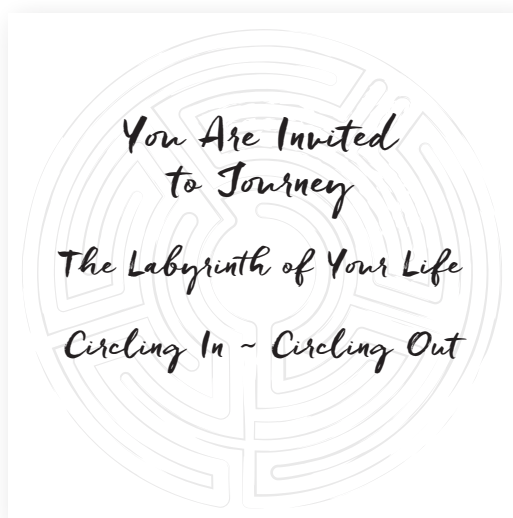
For some, the family was and is experienced positively. Returning to the family either physically and/or emotionally/mentally is like returning to a precious touchstone that imbues us with strength and love. For others, the family was and is experienced negatively. To return physically and/or emotionally/mentally is like diving into the abyss. Most of us would prefer to avoid experiencing the abyss. But as many a wise person has implied, the only way to true healing is to be willing to plunge into the darkness of the abyss and attempt to find the light.

For most of us, the family has impacted us both positively and negatively. That seems to be part and parcel of the human experience.

I want to be clear; I am not advocating living in the past. I wholeheartedly believe that being in the present is what allows

us to be fully alive and in touch with our power. However, one's past has a tremendous influence on one's present. I, therefore, advocate examining the past consciously, with intent, to give us knowledge and power in the present. If we avoid this conscious exploration, THE PAST will still be influencing us—we will simply be unconscious and unaware that it is doing so. Personally, I find conscious living to be preferable.

As is indicated in the table of contents, each chapter explains a concept pertinent to Family Systems Theory. At the end of each chapter is an inquiry that I encourage you to ponder. You may find it helpful to purchase a journal and record your responses to the questions. I also want to encourage you to consider discussing some of these inquiries, as well as your thoughts and concerns, with family members.



May you accept this invitation and use this book as your guide.

Chapter One

Why Does It Matter?

The Importance of Understanding How
a Family System Operates

Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

*He who knows others is wise, but he who
knows himself is enlightened.*

LAO-TZU

It may have been a dream.

I remember a man preaching from the pulpit with a strong booming voice proclaiming, “The greatest gift one can give to God is to know thyself.”

Being an inquisitive and philosophical nine-year-old, I gave that statement much thought. I am sure it was just such *thinking* that brought me to the field of psychotherapy and, in particular, to the field of marriage and family therapy.

My paternal grandmother, known to us as “Bobba,” started me on my journey to discovering myself. She delighted in the telling of family stories. It did not take me long to understand that it is, in fact, our stories and the messages in those real or imagined histories that help define how we think of ourselves, our lives, and the lives of others.

To “know thyself” is a great gift one can give to oneself, one’s partner, and to one’s children. It is impossible for us to know who we are as individuals without understanding our *family of origin*, our original family. Clearly, the relationships and events in the lives of children persist and define who they become as grown-ups.

Our stories help us to learn our family’s values. They help us to know who and what is important. They help us to define who we are and our place in the world.

It is not only the stories we are told about who we are that influence us but also the stories we tell ourselves that define us; after all, we spend more time talking to ourselves than we do talking to others. Our present thoughts are influenced by our past experiences. We are “programmed” by what we see, hear, and experience.

The term *family values* has been used and abused in the current social and political scene. What I am referring to when I write of family values are the purposes, aspirations, and goals of the family. How is the family supporting its members? How is the family responding to and accomplishing the developmental tasks that often produce confusion and strife among the family members?

I think of a healthy family not as a family without problems but as a family that is resilient and uses its resources to move beyond those times of difficulty or crises.

Family crises often occur when the family is undergoing a *predictable* developmental change, such as marriage, adoption, birth, having a teenager, children leaving home, relocation, or the death of an elderly member.

Then there are crises that are experienced by the family that are not *predicted* or expected, such as the untimely death of a child, a spouse, or a parent. Some other situations that may create family crises are bankruptcy, hospitalization, financial difficulties, infidelity, divorce, child custody issues, remarriage, negotiating a blended family, separation due to military service or work, alcoholism, drug addiction, abuse, sexual identity issues, or suicide.

There's No Place Like Home

Family Systems Theory, unlike traditional psychoanalytic theory, focuses on the dynamics between family members rather than focusing on the psyches of each individual. Family Systems Theory is a relational model for understanding the human psyche. The relationship between family members, particularly the push and pull between family members for distance and closeness, is viewed as one of the major factors underlying human behavior.

Family Systems Theory considers not only the individuals living in a household but ALL of the family across time and generations, including extended family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins. Most family therapists believe it is important to understand the family system across at least three generations, regardless of whether the persons are living or deceased, live nearby or far apart.

Individuals in a family share not only a history but also assumptions and beliefs about themselves, others, and how the world works. It is in our families that we learn how to relate to others in caring, nurturing, and supportive ways, and conversely, in ways that are hurtful, detrimental, and destructive.

Dorothy was right when she claims in *The Wizard of Oz*, “There’s no place like home.” This is true. You may have grown up in a loving, secure family that engendered loving and fond memories. Or you may have grown up in a chaotic and unsafe home. Thinking of “home” may bring up sad, hurt, even traumatic feelings. Nonetheless, “*there’s no place like home.*” It is the relationships we experience within our families that shape who we are, how we feel about ourselves, and how we attach and relate to others.

Family therapists believe that the power and influence of the relationships we have with other family members go beyond the grave. Neither distance nor death frees us from our family’s influence. It is how one chooses to deal with one’s family’s influence that is crucial to one’s well-being.

We have all experienced trauma.

What I mean by this is that I have yet to know anyone who has not had some life experience that has resulted in emotional suffering. Perhaps we have lost a loved one, or a beloved pet. Sometimes an injury or illness causes one to experience not only physical but also psychological trauma. Perhaps we experienced being bullied, or felt we were unjustly punished. I remember a childhood friend who got grounded for a month if she got anything less than an “A” on her report card.

The more fortunate among us have suffered less severe trauma, less often. Unfortunately, some have suffered intense and devastating emotional and psychological trauma that has an ongoing impact. These persons have suffered an event or events that have left them feeling emotionally overwhelmed, numb, profoundly anxious, often disconnected from self and others, and unsafe.

Unfortunately, there are many who have suffered severe emotional, physical, and verbal abuse from members of their families. Familial abuse, in my opinion, is the deepest, darkest, most devastating form of betrayal.

Whether an individual experiences repeated childhood trauma or a one-time traumatic event as an adult, feelings of shame and guilt often plague the trauma survivor. Trauma survivors describe sometimes experiencing difficulties in interpersonal relationships, particularly with those whom they are most intimate. Trauma survivors tend to suffer with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Those who have survived trauma have the capacity to recover from the wounds that may linger in their bodies, minds, and spirits. Healing these wounds takes time and commitment. In her inspiring memoir, *Never Tell*, Catherine McCall has written about her healing journey and the healing potential for sexual abuse survivors and their partners.

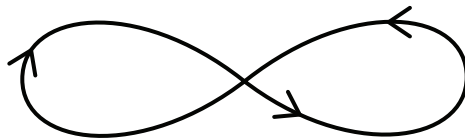
Healing from trauma wounds is a transformational journey that promotes the healing of the body, mind, and spirit. This

journey is a relational journey that endeavors to heal the traumatized brain and attachment wounds, thus allowing for a balanced and positive sense of self and others. Understanding more about one's family dynamics can certainly help us to make new choices and navigate the present in healthier, more productive ways.

Family therapy operates from a *systems perspective*. That means that the family is viewed as a whole in which all individual members affect one another. Relationship interactions and patterns become the focus of exploring human problems. Thus, rather than the focus being on cause and effect (linear thinking), the focus is on the relationships and the patterns of connecting among the members of the system (circular thinking).

The Feedback Loop

Family Systems Theory began developing in the 1940s and '50s. Mathematicians and engineers during World War II designed machines that operated on the principle of a feedback loop. They used the idea that information can be fed back into a system, causing the system to respond to that information.



1.1. Feedback loop

So, how did this new theory effect the practice of psychotherapy?

In the early years of development of family systems theories, anthropologists and communication theorists studied how family members responded to one another in a *circular* modality, or feedback loop. Before systems theory and the understanding

of circular causality, therapists instead worked from the idea of a linear causality.

The differences between linear and circular causality can be seen in the following example:

A mother brings her fifteen-year-old son, who has been skipping school and using drugs, to therapy. The therapist learns that the father recently lost his job. The son expresses that he is angry with the father because his father just “sits on the couch,” making no effort to find work. This therapist hypothesizes that the son is expressing his anger toward the father by acting out or misbehaving (a linear causality). The father’s behavior is thus causing the son’s behavior. Father → Son or A → B

A systems therapist would not dismiss this hypothesis but would want to explore the presenting problem of the fifteen-year-old son acting out by attempting to understand the interdependence of all the relationships in the family. The therapist would consider how each person in the family is influencing the others.

The son has been presented by the family as the *identified patient*, the family member for whom therapy is sought. A family therapist sees the *family system* as the “patient.” If I were the therapist, I would want to see all the family members in the first session. By doing so, I know that I would more likely be able to help the family identify the unhealthy or destructive relational patterns that are creating distress for individual members of the family. Thus, I could help them establish healthier, more productive patterns of relating, which would ultimately help the family resolve the “presenting problem” of the son’s misbehaving.

I would ask that the entire family—the father, mother, son (fifteen) who is the identified patient, and the daughter (thirteen)—to come in for the first session. I always take a thorough family history. I begin with the nuclear family, which is the family as presented. In this case, that would be the mother, father, and two children. In taking a thorough family history,